

Assessing Students' Exercise in Sales Pitching: A Preliminary Study

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is learning that comes from doing, and provides advantages over the traditional delivery of lectures. The hands-on learning approach and the experience of carrying out (for example, through role play) an assigned exercise can help students internalize concepts they learn in class. Many students find experiential learning a fun exercise that enhances their classroom experience. This paper details the nature of an experiential exercise examined in two courses in an undergraduate degree program, namely, Salesmanship, and Industrial Marketing. During the semester, the experiential exercise involved every student in an assignment, carried out individually, that gave them the experience of attempting to sell a product or service to potential customers through a sales pitching. Assessment was divided into two separate parts, for: (i) the sales pitching, and (ii) oral presentation. For the sales pitching, students were assessed on whether he/she was able to match certain features of the product to the customer's advantage. While for the oral presentation, a rubric was utilized to assess students on eight criteria: organization, subject knowledge, visual aids, eye contact, pronunciation, clarity of voice, confidence, and attire. Students were scored on four levels of performance, with a score of 1 (Below basic), 2 (Basic), 3 (Proficient), and 4 (Advanced). The study showed that students who were taught and discussed, as part of their syllabus, the topic of salesmanship, performed better than their counterpart who were only given a little guidance. Results of the sales pitching provide evidence that selling can be learnt.

KEYWORDS: experiential exercise, sales pitching, oral presentation, rubric

1. INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process (Sternberg and Zhang, 2000). University instructors are encouraged to incorporate realistic learning situations to allow their students the opportunity for training and development (Chan, 2012; Ramburuth & Daniel, 2011). Experiential learning enhances the learning-teaching process by creating opportunities for faculty and students to interact in a personalized manner (Heinz, 2013; Hickcox, 2002) and students were reported to prefer learning activities that can be described as experiential (Hawtrey, 2007).

Today's business is becoming more competitive where buyers are becoming more well-informed, gathering product information from multiple sources including those available on the internet before actually making their purchase. The information endows the client to strengthen their negotiable position. As such, traditional sales representatives are advised to add value or end up becoming

endangered (John Keiser, OneCoast CEO)¹. As such a successful sale person must recognize that price is not the only motivating factor, but the value that the product brings to the customer.

Perhaps one of the greatest myths is the idea that good salesmanship is born, not made. Others believe that if you have the gift of the gab, then a salesman could probably sell anything to anyone, including ice to Eskimos. Salesmanship and other marketing concepts are being taught in university classrooms across the globe. In classrooms, instructors help students understand that to making a successful sale involves several steps: identifying and understanding the client's needs or problems, developing a mutually satisfying, value-added solutions to those needs or problems and by adopting a customer-orientation, salespeople can create long-term relationship (Clarke and White, 2010).

A sale is a learning process (Venkatesh, 2013). Therefore selling can be taught in a classroom. This paper attempts to examine the performance of two groups of students required to pitch a sale of a product, with only one of the two groups being taught the art of salesmanship. Students were taught and discussed topics concerning salesmanship, defined as "the art of winning hearts of consumers to dispose the firm's products and services". Students who learnt salesmanship as part of their course syllabus were enrolled in a Salesmanship course, while the second (control) group were enrolled in an Industrial Marketing course. Both courses were taught by the same instructor who adopted an experiential learning approach to assessing students in these marketing courses.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT ASSIGNMENT

The BPMM3063 Industrial Marketing and the BPMM3173 Salesmanship courses are core courses designed for marketing majors in the Bachelor of Marketing with Honours degree programme². There are thirteen core courses (which carry a total of 39 credit hours) which are requirements for graduation for the degree programme³. Students normally register for the Industrial Marketing course in their fifth semester, while the Salesmanship course is taken in their sixth semester. Both courses require the basic BPMM 1013 Principles of Marketing course as a pre-requisite.

Students in both the Industrial Marketing and Salesmanship courses were assigned a similar project assignment. For the assignment, students were required to work individually where each student was required to do a "sales pitch" of a product or service to a panel of judge(s) and their colleagues. Each student was allowed to deliver the sales pitch for 80 seconds in either the English language or Bahasa Malaysia⁴, whichever he/she preferred.

Students in the Industrial Marketing course were not exposed to any formal discussions on the topic of selling or pitching a product as it was not part of their course syllabus. Nonetheless, some guidelines and coaching were given to them before the actual sales pitching. However, students in the

¹ Weiskott, M. (2012). Talking, Teaching and Tech: The Evolving Role of the Sales Rep. *Gifts & Decorative Accessories*. Issue 6, p38-44. 5p. , Database: Business Source Complete.

² The Bachelor of Marketing with Honours degree programme is introduced "to create managers, leaders, and professionals who are knowledgeable and skilful in business and marketing, are innovative, and ethical, as well as able to apply the learned knowledge and business and marketing skills." While its programme aims are as follows: (i) Apply concepts, theories and marketing practices to generate ideas and excellent marketing strategies, (ii) Utilizes knowledge, skill, and methods to become an effective and excellent marketer or marketing professional, and (iii) To face and handle challenges in the marketing and business world (source: www.cob.uum.edu.my)

³ Core courses in the Bachelor of Marketing with Honours degree programme include Introduction to Marketing, Marketing Management, Consumer Behaviour, Sales Management, Marketing Research, Marketing Strategies and Analysis, International Marketing, Industrial Marketing, Service Marketing, Integrated Marketing Communication, Salesmanship, Brand Management, and Seminar in Marketing.

⁴ Bahasa Malaysia is the national language of the country. Although classes are conducted in the English language students are given the choice to deliver their presentation in either language.

Salesmanship course were taught and discussed the steps involved in how to deliver a good sales pitch as part of their syllabus.

Each student was assessed on two distinct areas: (i) his/her ability to pitch the product or service, and (ii) his/her oral presentation skills. For the sales pitch, the student was expected to be able to explain the benefits/advantages of the product or service, along with its features, price, and other relevant information which the student felt was necessary to close a sale. For the oral presentation, students were assessed on four levels of performance, 'Below basic', 'Basic', 'Proficient', and 'Advanced' for eight criteria: (i) Organization, (ii) subject knowledge, (iii) visual aids, (iv) eye contact, (v) pronunciation, (vi) clarity, (vii) confidence, and (viii) attire.

3. THE PREPARATION

3.1 Teaching the Skills

Topics pertaining to how to deliver a good sales pitch were discussed over several class meetings before the actual sales pitch in the Salesmanship course. For this assigned sales pitch, students can follow the seven steps briefly outlined below:

1. Prepare.
 - Research. Preparation begins from researching about the product to gain product knowledge.
 - Know the product. Knowledge about the product and the advantages/benefits that it gives to the customer will give confidence and show that you know what you are talking about.
2. **Start off by building rapport.** Build some rapport with the customer before you get into the pitch.
3. Greet the prospective customer in the right way.
4. Get to the point.
5. Make the presentation look professional.
6. Have a clear message. Make sure the message you want to convey comes through to the audience.
7. Close the deal. A good way to do this is to run through the benefits of what you are selling and the solution it will provide to meet customer needs.

Students were also reminded to make the sales pitch a two-way conversation and not a lecture. This can easily happen if the student becomes nervous and wants to finish his/her sales pitch quickly. They were also advised to practice the pitch and, armed with product knowledge, to be able to internalize and use it in a natural conversational way. The salesperson is more likely to succeed if he/she pitches with the idea that he/she is going to have a conversation and build a relationship with the prospect instead of "just going to talk, talk, talk, and make the sale" (Smith, 2013). They should not be reading from notes but delivering the message clearly to the customer. Students should strive to create an emotional reaction with the customer(s). Furthermore, developing trust, understanding and being honest is a key essential in the delivery.

3.2 Presentation Stage

In this stage, the salesperson (students) presented his/her product and gave the prospect the opportunity to make a decision to purchase the product. The product was explained in detail including its features and advantages. The presentation sessions were videotaped and reviewing of the videotapes will allow the students to internalize these skills so that they appear natural.

4. RESULTS

A similar desired achievement target for both courses was also established to assess the students' performance in their oral presentation, with at least 75% of the students would achieve the level of 'Proficient' and above for all criteria.

4.1 The Sales Pitch

Fifty-five students in the Salesmanship, and 69 students in the Industrial Marketing courses were involved in the class assignment. Of the total number of 124 students, a majority of the students completed their sales pitching within the allocated 80 seconds.

Students chose a variety of products for the sales pitch and highlighted features of the product which they felt would benefit the prospect. Products included power banks, portable wifi modem, cordless mouse, printers, branded hand phones, smartphones, rechargeable mobile battery bank, and iPads. In selecting food items, students decided to take the issue of health seriously and pitched products such as health drinks, health foods, and natural/organic vitamins/supplements. Students proved their awareness of being environmentally-friendly by pitching "eco" water bottles, and "eco" air cooler.

A few female students used the tropical climate with its unpredictable showers and hot weather to their advantage when pitching their product, the umbrella. The umbrella is used not only to shelter from rain, but which can also, according to their sales pitch, "be used for self-defense". A few novelty items were also pitched such as water pillow, electric knead comb, thermoelectric-powered "smart" mug, iRobot Roomba vacuum cleaning robot, pillow blanket, "spywatch", LED watch, and "tangle teezer" hair brush.

4.2 The Oral Presentation

For the oral presentation of their sales pitching, a rubric was used to assess students on the following eight criteria: (i) organization, (ii) subject knowledge, (iii) visual aids, (iv) eye contact, (v) pronunciation, (vi) clarity of voice, (vii) confidence, and (viii) attire. Students were scored on four levels of performance, with a score of 1 (Below basic), 2 (Basic), 3 (Proficient), and 4 (Advanced).

Table 1 shows the assessment results for 69 students in the Industrial Marketing course. Results showed that for students in the course, the quality assurance target was achieved for the following criteria: (i) organization, (ii) Subject knowledge, (iii) eye contact, (iv) clarity of voice, (v) attire, where more than 75% of students scored 'Proficient' and above in these criteria. However the target was not achieved for the following three traits: visual aids, pronunciation, and confidence.

Table 1: Assessment results for oral presentation in the course BPMM3063 Industrial Marketing (N = 69)

Evaluative criteria	Below basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Organization*	0	6 (8.7%)	49 (71.0%)	15 (21.7%)
Subject knowledge*	1 (1.4%)	18 (26.1%)	34 (49.3%)	16 (23.2%)
Visual aids	3 (4.3%)	27 (39.1%)	28 (40.6%)	11 (15.9%)
Eye contact*	3 (4.3%)	17 (24.6%)	37 (53.6%)	12 (17.4%)
Pronunciation	4 (5.8%)	26 (37.7%)	30 (43.5%)	9 (13.0%)
Clarity of voice*	2 (2.9%)	17 (24.6%)	35 (50.7%)	15 (21.7%)
Confidence	5 (7.2%)	28 (40.6%)	24 (34.8%)	12 (17.4%)
Attire*	2 (2.9%)	6 (8.7%)	35 (50.7%)	26 (37.7%)

*Note: The achievement target was achieved for these criteria

Table 2 shows the assessment results for 55 students in the Salesmanship course. Results showed that for students in the course, the quality assurance target was achieved for all criteria where more than 75% of students scored 'Proficient' and above in all the criteria assessed.

Table 2: Assessment results for oral presentation in the course BPMM3173 Salesmanship (N = 55)

Evaluative criteria	Below basic	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Organization	0	7 (12.7%)	36 (65.5%)	12 (21.8%)
Subject knowledge	1 (1.8%)	12 (21.8%)	33 (60.0%)	9 (16.4%)
Visual aids	3 (5.5%)	19 (34.5%)	25 (45.5%)	8 (14.5%)
Eye contact	1 (1.8%)	12 (21.8%)	31 (56.4%)	11 (20.0%)
Pronunciation	1 (1.8%)	21 (38.2%)	28 (50.9%)	5 (9.1%)
Clarity of voice	0	16 (29.1%)	33 (60.0%)	6 (10.9%)
Confidence	0	19 (34.5%)	30 (54.5%)	6 (10.9%)
Attire	0	4 (7.3%)	35 (63.6%)	16 (29.1%)

*Note: The achievement target was achieved for all criteria

5. DISCUSSION

For the sales pitching, each student was assessed on the following major criterion, that is, whether he/she was able to match certain features of the product or services to the customer's advantage. Overall, it was observed that students performed well in their sales pitching assignment.

Students' choice of products for the sales pitch showed that they were able to identify their prospect (college students), and were able to highlight features of the product which added value to the prospect. This was evident in examining the products that were pitched which were items popular and appealing in the life of a college student. The more interesting presentations were when salespersons (students) brought in the products as exhibits or allowed prospect(s) to handle, feel or sample their product. Many more students made their pitch in the English language as opposed to Bahasa Malaysia.

Every student was provided with a feedback immediately after his/her sales pitch either in a group or individually. Assessments were made based on the seven steps in how to deliver a good sales pitch as outlined (as in 3.1 above). A majority of the students were found to be prepared because they had carried out research about the product and its features. But more importantly, they had product knowledge and were able to identify and match the product's benefits to the customers. Presentations looked professional aided by appropriate visuals. Additionally, students brought along the product. Students greeted the customers in a professional manner, and immediately delivered their message clearly. A little interaction between the salesperson (student) and customers were observed.

However, the following suggestions were made to the students: (1) Try to build some rapport with the customer. Students were observed to stand in front of the class and did not interact with any of his/her customer before the start of the pitch. (2) Show confidence. A few students lacked confidence in their presentation. (3) Focus on the value that the product brings to the customer. A few students paid more attention to the technical details of their product and had little time left to explain the value of the product to the customer. (4) Focus on one or two main benefits of the product. Some students tried to explain too many details of the product and rushed to complete their sales pitch, or were unable to finish within the allocated time. (5) Strive to create an emotional reaction with the customer(s).

Results from the students' oral presentation as in Table 1 and Table 2 showed that both groups of students from the Industrial Marketing, and Salesmanship courses demonstrated organization in their presentation such that the audience could follow. They also showed full knowledge of their product information and were at ease with the information. Students maintained eye contact most of the time with the audience, seldom returning to their notes (a majority did not bring in any notes). Both male

and female students presented in a clear voice such that audience can hear their presentation, with few (no) pronunciation errors and complete (few run-on) sentences. They were (somewhat) appropriately dressed for the sales pitching.

Results from the oral presentation of the two groups of students showed some interesting observations. Firstly, students in the Salesmanship performed better than students in the Industrial Marketing course. Their performance on all the evaluative criteria achieved the quality assurance target established where more than 75% of students scored 'Proficient' and above in all the criteria assessed (organization, subject knowledge, visual aids, eye contact, pronunciation, clarity of voice, confidence, and attire). Students in the Industrial Marketing course did not achieve the target on three criteria: visuals aid, pronunciation, and confidence. This may be due to the fact that students in the Salesmanship course were taught the art of selling as part of their course syllabus.

Secondly, students in the Salesmanship class used visual aids effectively enhancing the presentation of the product. Finally, students in the Salesmanship class were more relaxed and confident, and were quick to recover from minor mistakes made in their presentation. About 48% of students in the Industrial Marketing class were nervous and showed some tension during their presentation.

6. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Although the results of this preliminary study were positive, there were some significant limitations. The most prominent limitation is that the exercise was carried out once during the semester to customers who were their classmates. It is unlikely that a single sales pitching exercise would tremendously improve students' salesmanship skills. A further study of a sales pitch to actual customers unknown to the students could yield new insights into successful sales pitching.

Another drawback of this study was the control group which was made up of students in a different year of study as compared to students in the third year Salesmanship course. The control group students were enrolled in the second-year Industrial Marketing course. It would be interesting to note if there exists any significant difference in student performance if the control group were also students enrolled in another salesmanship course but did not receive any training in salesmanship.

7. CONCLUSION

Although this paper is a brief review pertaining to the topic of salesmanship and how it was assessed in a class assignment, it presents information to help the instructor realize the extent to which salesmanship can be developed among students. The overall findings of the study were positive. Students were prepared for each of their individual sales pitch. To the knowledge of the students, their sessions were videotaped. These videotaped sessions provide invaluable reviews and feedback to both students and instructors to internalize their selling skills.

The way to truly learn salesmanship is to actually do it. Therefore in a classroom setting, students should be provided the opportunity to practice and experience selling in front of their classmates, other faculty members, or people from the industry. Various types of experiential learning activities and approaches to teaching can be introduced into the classroom to enhance the learning-teaching process.

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